



## Evaluating the Nature of North Korea's Policy Shift toward South Korea

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### Is North Korea's Shift in Policy Toward South Korea Defensive or Offensive in Nature?

In December 2023, during the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, and in January 2024, at the Supreme People's Assembly, Kim Jong Un redefined inter-Korean relations as those of "two belligerent states," emphasizing the necessity for a "fundamental shift in policy toward South Korea." Against this backdrop, some North Korean observers interpret this shift as "defensive measures" aimed at internal control. In other words, the shift in North Korea's policy toward South Korea is seen as an acknowledgment of defeat in the inter-Korean competition.

The nature of North Korea's policy shift toward the South is crucial for understanding North Korea's intentions and formulating appropriate countermeasures. Therefore, this Issue Brief aims to analyze this policy shift in detail and, based on this analysis, propose directions for future policy toward North Korea.

#### *Limitations of the Defensive Aspect*

Some interpret Kim Jong Un's proclaimed "pacification of South Korea" or "preparation for a great transformation" as a defensive measure aimed at internal consolidation. This interpretation suggests that the shift in North Korea's policy toward the South is driven by concerns over potential regime instability, aiming to manage the regime through defensive containment measures. In other words, this shift in North Korea's policy toward the South is seen as an admission of defeat in the inter-Korean system competition, akin to a "hedgehog strategy."

Those who view the recent shift in North Korea's policy toward the South as defensive provide three main arguments: 1) it is a strategy to block the spread of South Korean influence or longing for unification within North Korean society; 2) it is a long-term exit strategy to mitigate the burdens and side effects of Kim Jong Un's nuclear pursuits in response to South Korea's strong countermeasures; 3) it is characterized as an attempt to partially improve the neglected livelihoods of North Koreans by adjusting the pace of security competition with the South.

While there is a defensive undercurrent in North Korea's recent domestic and foreign policies, a closer examination of the background of these policy implementations is predominantly offensive, aiming to directly confront internal and external crises. This analysis will delve into three specific aspects to illustrate that North Korea's shift in policy towards the South and subsequent internal measures go beyond a defensive stance: 1) preventing internal regime instability; 2) mitigating the side effects of a nuclear-centric policy; and 3) pursuing improvements in living conditions amid ongoing economic hardship.

### ***Indirectly Aiming to Block “South Korean Influence”***

Kim Jong Un, while declaring a policy shift towards South Korea and defining inter-Korean relations as those between hostile states, cited South Korea’s consistent “unification by absorption” policy and its characterization as nothing more than a puppet state of the United States as reasons. In line with Kim Jong Un’s directive to “segregate all inter-Korean linkage conditions in border areas,” North Korea began reinforcing the blockade along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), including laying mines along the Gyeongui Line inter-Korean transit route. This demonstrates that North Korea’s policy shift toward South Korea is a typical strategy of blocking and severance, aimed at preventing the spread of regime instability by fostering hostility instead of admiration toward South Korea.

However, it is difficult to view the concern over South Korea’s unification by absorption policy or the blocking of South Korean influence and liberal ideas as the core goals. While South Korean longing and non-socialist trends have emerged as serious issues within the North Korean system, they have been strictly controlled for several years. Examples include the enactment of laws such as the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act (2020), the Youth Education Guarantee Law (2021), and the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Law (2023), which have strengthened social control and imposed severe penalties on violators. Therefore, it is unlikely that the internal disturbances caused by anti-socialist issues are the direct motivation for the recent shift in policy toward South Korea.

### ***Unrelated to Alleviating the Burden of Nuclear Development Efforts***

It does not require extensive explanation to assert that the recent shift in North Korea’s policy towards the South is not a defensive measure aimed at alleviating the side effects of prolonged focus on nuclear development and the deferment of addressing livelihood issues. This is evident from the fact that North Korea’s work on advancing its nuclear missiles has not ceased. Even after the policy shift towards South Korea, Kim Jong Un continues to call for the “strengthening of national defense,” encouraging the advancement and mass production of nuclear missiles.

For Kim Jong Un, the nuclear development policy is the only achievement he can prominently showcase, and the path of advancing nuclear missiles is intrinsic to his regime’s identity. By highlighting the “vicious pursuit of confrontation” by South Korea, Kim Jong Un aims to heighten security tensions to justify the necessity of developing nuclear missiles, especially in light of the side effects of the long-standing nuclear development policy being openly discussed within North Korea.

Through the deceptive tactic of shifting its policy towards the South, North Korea aims to target South Korean society, provoking internal conflicts as South Korea approaches its April general elections. Simultaneously, North Korea seeks to drive a wedge in the ROK-U.S. alliance, targeting a potential second Trump administration to acknowledge North Korea as a “nuclear-armed state.” Therefore, the objectives of blocking South Korean influence or mitigating the side effects of a nuclear arms race are secondary.

### ***Unrelated to its Intention to Focus on the Economy***

Since the Plenary Meeting in December 2019, Kim Jong Un has publicly acknowledged the “stagnation and decline” of economic projects and has encouraged increased production. Over the subsequent two years, he attributed economic difficulties to external factors such as sanctions, quarantine measures, and

natural disasters, acknowledging that there are “many unstable elements threatening the people’s livelihoods” (October 2020) and that “the food situation has become tense” (June 2021).

As evidenced by Kim Jong Un’s previous statements, it is not a novel claim that he has described the shortage of essential goods as a “serious political issue.” If he truly perceived the living difficulties of residents as a significant problem, he would not have neglected North Korea’s distorted situation for such an extended period. Instead, by labeling it as a serious issue, Kim Jong Un appears to harness an aggressive propaganda tactic to justify his agenda.

### **Kim Jong Un’s Perception of Domestic and International Situation and Strategy for Overcoming Current Conditions**

Kim Jong Un’s recent measures, aimed at overcoming challenges through offensive strategies, can be understood from his perception of the domestic and international situation. Kim Jong Un perceives that the economy has improved since the latter half of 2023 due to the resumption of border trade, increased grain production, and earning foreign currency from Russia. Additionally, he seems to believe that the resurgence of the new Cold War, the return of geopolitics, the elections in South Korea and the United States, and strengthened North Korea-China-Russia solidarity as opportunities for North Korea to play a “strategic state” role.

To accurately understand the nature of North Korea’s policy shift, one must consider both Kim Jong Un’s words and actions. Alongside his statements, attention must also be given to the provocative actions threatening the U.S. and South Korea, such as the test launch of the solid-fuel-based hypersonic IRBM on January 14 and the submarine-launched strategic cruise missile (SLCM) on January 28.

### **Conclusion: Prospects of North Korea’s Aggression toward the South and Our Response Strategy**

The recent shift in North Korea’s policy toward the South is an offensive measure aimed at underpinning its policy of developing nuclear missiles. Sending simultaneous signals of having no intention of war and strengthening nuclear war preparations should be seen as a forewarning of provocations that include nuclear blackmail, even if not immediate war. These provocations are likely to manifest not as isolated incidents but as gray zone strategies, incremental complex provocations, and hybrid provocations.

To counter North Korea’s shift in policy towards the South and the threat of nuclear war, it is essential to be prepared not only in the military but also in civil and governmental settings and accurately inform the public of North Korea’s intentions to avoid falling into its divisive tactics. Regarding North Korea’s nuclear threats, South Korea must strengthen the extended deterrence through the ROK-U.S. Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) established after the Washington Declaration last year and reinforce the collective response harnessing the ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation framework established at the Camp David Summit.

Additionally, a consistent and broader approach to North Korean policy is necessary. It should be recognized that the target of our policy is not limited to North Korea’s leadership alone. Our policy

targets should also include the power elite and residents, requiring a balanced approach towards all three groups. Despite the unpredictability of the North Korean leadership, efforts must be maintained to ensure security, manage peace through dialogue and cooperation, and continuously strive for unification.

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## About Experts



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Dr. Han Ki-bum worked as a North Korea analyst at the National Intelligence Service over 20 years before retiring in February 2009 as the third deputy director (in charge of North Korea affairs). After retiring from the service, he worked as a visiting professor at Korea University and a visiting researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification, And then served as the first deputy director of the NIS (in charge of North Korea and overseas affairs) again from April 2013 ~ February 2016. Since then, he has been working as a endowed Research Fellow at the Institute for National Unification, then as a endowed Research Fellow at the Institute for North Korean Studies, and as a Visiting Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies from January 2024.